THE ONE BIG QUESTION

BETH'S eyes were filled with tears as she laid down the newspaper one day last summer. "O Aunt Nan!" she cried. "Isn't it frightful to read about all this suffering and sacrifice and bloodshed? I realize it so much more, some way, since the boys we know are in it. And I don't see how their own people bear it at all! Do you, Aunt Nan? Take Mrs. Bates, for example. How can she bear up so calmly now that Tom is wounded? Why, I felt badly enough, when the news came, just because I'd always known him—and she's his *mother!* It seems almost hard-hearted of her. Just think if it were Brother Jack!"

Aunt Nan surveyed her niece slowly for a long moment before she answered.

"My dear," she said then, "I have just been to see Mrs. Bates, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind if I shared a confidence with you—for one thing, because you will understand her better, and for another, because it may help you to do your best, as I'm sure it will me, both in bearing and in working here at home. She told me something that Tom said to her just before he left home. He hadn't often spoken about religious matters—even to her. You know how boys and young men are. But he was telling her about his enlisting, and he said this:

"'Mother, I've thought a good many times about a talk our minister gave one Communion Sunday. He said that when we were remembering how Christ's body had been broken and his blood shed—and *what for*—we wanted to remember one other thing, too: that *our* bodies were being broken and *our* blood shed every day of our lives, even if it were only bit by bit and drop by drop. And he wanted us all to ask ourselves whether it was for anything worth while. That's worried me sometimes, mother, when I've got to thinking about what most folks' lives amount to in the long run. And that's one thing about this war—whatever sacrifice a fellow's called on to make, he'll know that it's for something that's worth it. His life won't be dribbling away on a lot of junk as it might here at home.'

"So that, you see, Beth, is why she can bear up 'so calmly,' as you say, when her son is wounded—perhaps dying 'over there.' Because she knows that whatever happens he's satisfied with the answer to the one big question of his life."

Beth's eyes were still misty, but they shone now behind the tears.

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Nan!" she said softly. "You've made me understand—and see—as I never did before. The suffering and the sorrow and the sacrifice aren't the most important things after all, are they, big as they seem? The one big question, as you call it, is the thing that counts most."

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